

Dativ verbs

— VERBEN MIT DATIV

Dativ verbs are German verbs whose object goes in the dative case: helfen, gefallen, gehören, geben.

Saying “gefällt mich” instead of “gefällt mir” flips the meaning. English verbs never tell you which case the object takes; in German, the verb decides.

CONTENTS

- 01 The question: who picks the case? 02 You already do this in English
- 03 Verbs with the Dativ — the list to memorise
- 04 Four verbs where the subject switches sides — the real breaking point
- 05 Verbs with two objects: to whom + what 06 What order with two objects?
- 07 Seven verbs people mix up 08 What to do this week 09 Test yourself

01 00:10

The question: who picks the case?



SHORTCUT

The verb picks the case, not you. If you go by English, you will get about fourteen verbs wrong — memorise those fourteen and the rest already fits.

The most natural bridge when learning German is this: “**him** is Akkusativ, **(to) him** is Dativ.” That bridge **works** — in most sentences it gives the right answer:

The problem is not where the bridge holds, it is **where it breaks**. And it does not break on random verbs — it breaks on “help”, “thank”, “believe”, “answer”, the verbs you use **every single day**.

× Ich helfe **dich**.

Comes out when you think “help you” = a plain object, like “save you”.

✓ Ich helfe **dir**.

Correct — **helfen** takes the Dativ.

- ① This is not a matter of logic. There is no satisfying answer to why **helfen** takes the Dativ — Germans don't know either. The verb simply **carries** its case, just as English verbs carry their little words: you *listen to* someone, you never *listen* someone.

02 01:00

You already do this in English

English verbs pick their little words too, and you do it without thinking. Nobody says “I'm looking him” — your ear rejects it. The reason German feels hard is not the rule, it is **that your ear for it hasn't been built yet**.

ENGLISH VERB	THE WORD IT NEEDS	THE WRONG VERSION
look	at	I'm looking at him / ~~I'm looking him~~
listen	to	I listen to her / ~~I listen her~~
wait	for	I'm waiting for you / ~~I'm waiting you~~
depend	on	I depend on you / ~~I depend you~~

Nobody taught you this table, yet you use it flawlessly. In German the job is **the same** — you just load the list consciously, once.

03 02:00

Verbs with the Dativ — the list to memorise

German has around fifty verbs that take the Dativ. These are the ones you will meet at A2 and **actually use**. We keep the list short on purpose — a long list doesn't get memorised, a short one does.

VERB	MEANING	EXAMPLE	WHAT ENGLISH DOES
helfen	to help	Ich helfe dir .	“help you” — plain object , trap
danken	to thank	Ich danke Ihnen .	“thank you” — trap
antworten	to answer	Antworte mir!	“answer me” — trap
glauben	to believe (someone)	Ich glaube dir .	“believe you” — trap
gehören	to belong to	Das Buch gehört mir .	“belongs to me” — matches
passen	to fit · to suit	Die Hose passt dir .	“fits you” — trap
gefallen	to please (“I like it”)	Das gefällt mir .	subject flips — see below

VERB	MEANING	EXAMPLE	WHAT ENGLISH DOES
schmecken	to taste good (to someone)	Das schmeckt mir .	subject flips
folgen	to follow	Folgen Sie mir .	"follow me" — plain object → trap
zuhören	to listen	Hör mir zu!	"listen to me" — the "to" is your clue
begegnen	to run into · to meet by chance	Ich bin ihm begegnet .	"ran into him" — plain object → trap
gratulieren	to congratulate	Ich gratuliere dir .	"congratulate you" — plain object → trap
fehlen	to be missing · to be missed	Du fehlst mir .	subject flips
wehtun	to hurt	Mein Kopf tut mir weh .	subject flips

Memory shortcut: most of these verbs describe something that happens **between two people** — help, thanks, belief, an answer. German marks an action “aimed at a person” with the Dativ.

① This list sits on a single frame in the PDF. Download the worksheet at the end of the page to your phone and open it now and then over the first two weeks — this kind of list sticks through **seeing it again**, not through reading it once.

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04 03:20

Four verbs where the subject switches sides — the real breaking point

In the list above I marked four verbs “subject flips”. They are the hardest part of the Dativ verbs and **they trip up every English speaker in the same place: gefallen · schmecken · fehlen · wehtun.**

In English you say “*I like this film*”: **I** am the subject, the film is the object. German builds the same meaning **backwards**: the *film* becomes the subject and *I* drop into the Dativ. Word for word: “*This film is pleasing to me.*”

ENGLISH SETUP	GERMAN SETUP	SENTENCE
I like it	it is pleasing to me	Der Film gefällt mir .
I like the soup (taste)	it tastes good to me	Die Suppe schmeckt mir .
I miss you	you are missing to me	Du fehlst mir .
my head hurts	the head does pain to me	Der Kopf tut mir weh .

How to check: put the verb in the **plural**. If the subject really is the “thing”, the verb agrees with it — **Die Filme gefallen mir**. If “ich” were the subject, the verb would be **gefalle**. It isn’t.



TRAP 01

“Ich gefalle den Film” — taking the subject for yourself

Translate “I like” word for word and this is what comes out — and in German it means **something completely different**: *Ich gefalle dir* = “*You like me*”.

✗ ~~Ich gefalle den Film.~~

Wrong — both the case and the subject are backwards.

✓ **Der Film gefällt mir.**

I like the film.

If you want to say it **with yourself as the subject**, use another verb: *Ich mag den Film* or *Ich finde den Film gut*. Both take the Akkusativ and both are correct.

05 04:30

Verbs with two objects: to whom + what

The second group is easier: some verbs carry **two objects** at once. One is a person (Dativ), the other a thing (Akkusativ). English works the same way — “I gave **the child the book**” — so there is no trap here, only an **order**.

VERB	MEANING	EXAMPLE
geben	to give	Ich gebe dir das Geld .
schenken	to give as a gift	Sie schenkt ihm eine Uhr .
zeigen	to show	Zeig mir den Weg .
erklären	to explain	Erkläre mir die Regel .
bringen	to bring	Bring uns die Rechnung .

VERB	MEANING	EXAMPLE
schicken	to send	Ich schicke dir eine Mail .
erzählen	to tell	Erzähl mir die Geschichte .
empfehlen	to recommend	Ich empfehle Ihnen den Fisch .
leihen	to lend	Leihst du mir dein Auto?
kaufen	to buy (for someone)	Ich kaufe dir ein Eis .

The same logic in all of them: **something passes from one person to another**. German puts the “thing that passes” in the Akkusativ and “who it passes to” in the Dativ. This is not a rule, it is a *picture* — once you hold the picture, you don’t even have to memorise the list.

06 05:30

What order with two objects?

One rule is enough: **the shorter one goes first**. A pronoun is short, a noun is long. So with two nouns the person comes first, but the moment a pronoun steps in, the order changes.

WHAT YOU HAVE	ORDER	EXAMPLE
two nouns	Dativ → Akkusativ	Ich gebe dem Kind das Buch .
one pronoun + one noun	pronoun → noun	Ich gebe es dem Kind .
two pronouns	Akkusativ → Dativ	Ich gebe es ihm .

The last row flips, and few people know it: with two pronouns it is **thing first, person second** — es ihm · ihn mir · sie uns.

- ① We go through the exact position of pronouns and where **nicht** goes in detail on the [word order page](#); the three rows here are enough for everyday speech.

07 06:10

Seven verbs people mix up

This is the one part of the page to memorise. English treats all seven the same way, so nothing in English tells you which case German wants. Three take the Dativ, four take the Akkusativ — all of them everyday verbs.

VERB	WHAT ENGLISH SAYS	WHAT GERMAN WANTS	CORRECT
folgen	follow me	Dativ	Folgen Sie mir .
zuhören	listen to me	Dativ	Hör mir zu .
gratulieren	congratulate you	Dativ	Ich gratuliere dir .
anrufen	call you	Akkusativ	Ich rufe dich an .
fragen	ask you	Akkusativ	Ich frage dich .
besuchen	visit you	Akkusativ	Ich besuche dich .
treffen	meet you	Akkusativ	Ich treffe dich .

Four take the Akkusativ, three the Dativ. One sentence to keep them apart: **phone-question-visit-meeting** take the Akkusativ; **following-listening-congratulating** take the Dativ.



TRAP 02

“Ich rufe dir an” – the most common mistake

A phone call feels like something you give *to* someone, so **dir** slips in. German treats the call as an **action on a person**: you are the one being called, so it is the Akkusativ.

✗ Ich rufe ~~dir~~ an.

Wrong.

✓ Ich rufe **dich** an.

I’ll call you.



TRAP 03

A separable prefix does not change the case

zuhören and **anrufen** are both separable verbs, yet one takes the Dativ and the other the Akkusativ. **The prefix has nothing to do with the case** — the decision lies entirely in the verb itself.

✓ Hör **mir** zu und ruf **mich** an.

Listen to me and call me. — English says “me” both times, German uses two different forms.

If you have forgotten how separable verbs break apart in a sentence, go back to the [separable verbs page](#) for a minute.

08 06:50

What to do this week

This topic doesn't stick by memorising tables but **by using the verbs in your own sentences**. A five-minute daily drill:

- Pick **three verbs** each day — one Dativ, one Akkusativ, one with two objects.
- Put each into a sentence about **your own life**: **Ich helfe meiner Mutter.** · **Ich rufe meinen Bruder an.** · **Ich schicke ihm ein Foto.**
- **Repeat the sentence with a pronoun**: **Ich helfe ihr.** · **Ich rufe ihn an.** · **Ich schicke es ihm.**
- Once a week, write out the “subject flips” four: **gefallen** · **schmecken** · **fehlen** · **wehtun**. These don't stick without being seen again.

- ① Next up is the full table of pronouns: you'll see there where the words we used here — **mir** · **dir** · **ihm** — come from.

09 BUILD

Build the sentence yourself

Tap the words and put them in order. This is the hardest part of German — and there are no options to pick from, **you** build it.

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

09 07:10

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+7

Take the full test

13 questions · timed · rule breakdown at the end



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